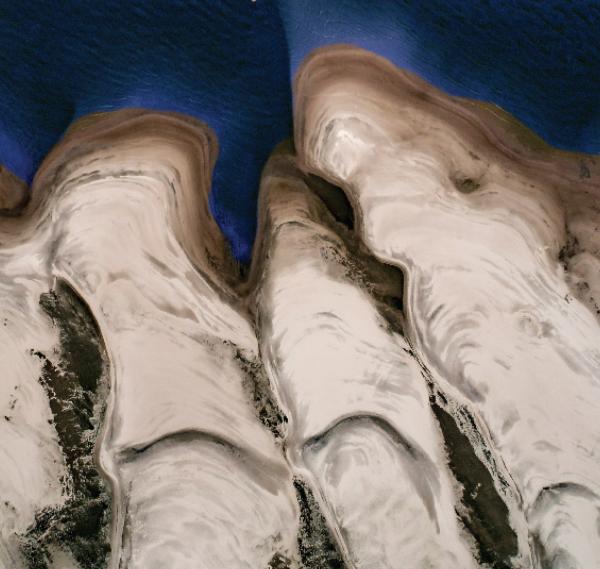# Antisemitism in Online Communication

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate Speech in the Twenty-First Century

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Karolina Placzynta, and Chloé Vincent

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3. 'Pop' Antisemitism and Deviant Communities

An Analysis of French Social Media Users' Reactions to the Dieudonné (2020) and Kanye West (2022) Antisemitism Controversies

Alexis Chapelan

Social media platforms and the interactive web have had a significant impact on political socialisation, creating new pathways of community-building that shifted the focus from real-life, localised networks (such as unions or neighbourhood associations) to vast, diffuse and globalised communities (Finin et al. 2008, Rainie and Wellman 2012, Olson 2014, Miller 2017). Celebrities or influencers are often focal nodes for the spread of information and opinions across these new types of networks in the digital space (see Hutchins and Tindall 2021). Unfortunately, this means that celebrities' endorsement of extremist discourse or narratives can potently drive the dissemination and normalisation of hate ideologies.

This paper sets out to analyse the reaction of French social media audiences to antisemitism controversies involving pop culture celebrities. I will focus on two such episodes, one with a 'national' celebrity at its centre and the other a 'global' celebrity: the social media ban of the French-Cameroonian comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala in June–July 2020 and the controversy following US rapper Kanye West's spate of antisemitic statements in October–November 2022. The empirical corpus comprises over

4,000 user comments on *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* (now *X*). My methodological approach is two-pronged: a preliminary mapping of the text through content analysis is followed by a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis that examines linguistic strategies and discursive constructions employed by social media users to legitimise antisemitic worldviews. We lay particular emphasis on the manner in which memes, dog-whistling or coded language (such as allusions or inside jokes popular within certain communities or fandoms) are used not only to convey antisemitic meaning covertly but also to build a specific form of counter-cultural solidarity. This solidarity expresses itself in the form of "deviant communities" (see Proust et al. 2020) based on the performative and deliberate transgression of societal taboos and norms.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms and the interactive web have had a significant impact on political socialisation, creating new pathways of community-building that shifted the focus from real-life, localised networks (such as unions or neighbourhood associations) to vast, diffuse and globalised communities (Finin et al. 2008, Rainie and Wellman 2012, Olson 2014, Miller 2017). Celebrities or influencers are often focal nodes for the spread of information and opinions across these new types of networks in the digital space (Hutchin and Tindall 2021). Unfortunately, this means that celebrities' endorsement of extremist narratives can potently drive the dissemination and normalisation of hate ideologies. Not only do celebrity influencers benefit from an outsized personal media salience (Bantimaroudis 2021), which gives them an agenda-setting power; they can also leverage an affective capital from their fan communities (Mansor et al. 2020, Dong 2022). Therefore, influencers can act as "ambassadors of ideology" (Rothut et al. 2023) who bypass the gatekeeping filters of mainstream media and significantly impact the public's consumption of political information (Newman et al. 2021). However, we identify a gap in existing scientific literature concerning the role of parasocial opinion leaders in the spread of hate ideologies, with most studies focusing on the 'supply' side of the issue (Gaden and Dumitrica 2014, Stehr et

al. 2015, Winter et al. 2020, Rothut et al. 2023). We aim to address this by shifting the emphasis from the vertical (top-down) agenda-setting power of celebrities to the communication strategies used by their audience across a range of social media networks (*Facebook*, *Twitter* (now *X*), *YouTube*) in reaction to exclusionary and discriminatory influencer communication.

This paper sets out to analyse the reaction of French social media audiences to antisemitism controversies involving pop culture celebrities. I focus on two such episodes, one with a 'national' celebrity at its centre and the other a 'global' celebrity: the social media ban of the French-Cameroonian comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala in June and July 2020 and the controversy following American rapper Kanye West's spate of antisemitic statements in October and November 2022. The focus on user-generated discourse and on comment sections as crucial loci of linguistic struggle (see Loke 2012, Toepfl and Piwoni 2015, Calabrese 2019, Lee et al. 2020) sheds light on the role of audience agency in the performance of 'anti-system' conspiracist and antisemitic narratives. I highlight in particular the linguistic strategies of minimisation, justification and legitimation through which social media users publicly negotiate support for pop culture figures accused of antisemitism. At the juncture of traditional Jew-hatred and pop culture, 'pop' antisemitism emerges as a novel configuration—one co-constructed top down by influencers as well as bottom up by web users from their communities, and as a major driver of hate ideology in society.

2. Methodological approach

My contribution largely builds on the methodology and the data used within the research project Decoding Antisemitism; however, given the smaller and more focused corpus, I rely for the analysis phrase on qualitative tools such as Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse Historical Approach. The empirical corpus comprises over 4,000 user comments on the *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* accounts of leading French news outlets (see Table 3.1) reporting critically on Dieudonné and West's statements. My methodological approach is two-pronged. I first conduct a preliminary thematic mapping of the text through qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2015) enriched with categories

from antisemitism studies, using a complex codebook developed within the Decoding Antisemitism project and comprising over 80 items derived from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s definition of antisemitism (IHRA 2023, Becker et al. 2024). The codebook takes into account multiple levels of analysis, such as the conceptual level (antisemitic concepts comprising stereotypes, analogies and self-references), the linguistic level (figures of speech, argumentation, etc.) and the semiotic level (punctuation, icons, emoticons, text-image relations, etc.). The qualitative content-analysis stage is followed by a more granular qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis which examines linguistic strategies and discursive constructions employed by social media users to legitimise antisemitic worldviews. Within the field of critical discourse studies, Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) offers some of the most efficient analytical tools to systematically deconstruct such utterances (Wodak/Reisigl 2009). Building on the DHA, I have designed a framework that takes into account multiple heuristic levels of analysis, synthesised in Figure 3.1:

Dieudonné subcorpus (2020)	Kanye West subcorpus (2022)
Le Monde	Le Monde
Le Figaro	Le Figaro
Libération	Le Point
Marianne	Nouvel Obs
Valeurs Actuelles	Les Echos
Le Parisien	Le Parisien
L'Express	BFMTV
Les Inrockuptibles	LCI
Numerama	TFI
	Les Inrockuptibles
	French Rap_US
	France GQ

Table 3.1. Analysed media outlets

Level of analysis	What is analysed	Direction of decoding
Micro level Textual sub-units (phrases, clauses, tropes, lexemes, icons or emojis)	**Rhetorical devices:** rhetorical questions, metaphors, puns, euphemisms, hyperboles, etc. **Linguistic and semiotic markers of a 'coded language' of antisemitism:** memes, dog-whistles, allusions or inside jokes popular within certain communities or fandoms	
Meso level Text as a whole	**Global discursive strategies:** nomination (construction of in-groups and out-groups) predication (labelling social actors more or less positively) argumentation (justification of positive and negative attributions) perspectivisation (construing a certain frame of interpretation for an event) intensification and mitigation	
Macro level Broader sociopolitical and historical context	**Media practices:** impact of social media communication practices on antisemitic discourse, with a focus on influencer communication as a potential catalyst of virality for hate speech (see section 2.2). **Cultural, ideological and normative practices:** evolution of antisemitic narratives and imagery in France and the United States in the post-Holocaust era; cross-pollination between traditional anti-Jewish tropes and other discursive formations, such as anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-elitism or anti-feminism (see sections 2.2 and 2.3)	

Figure 3.1. Levels of discourse analysis

In order to understand how online support for controversial influencers can map onto and reinforce patterns of anti-Jewish prejudice, the following research questions are asked: Is there a correlation between support for Kanye West and Dieudonné and expressions of antisemitic prejudice? Which antisemitic stereotypes or concepts are used to legitimise West's and Dieudonné's positions? How explicit is antisemitic rhetoric in this context and what are the functions of coded language in the discursive construction of the 'us/them' dichotomy?

2.1 Antisemitism and (online) virality: The role of influencers

Virality is defined as the probability of an entity—such as a message—being passed along (Hansen et al. 2011). While virality is an anthropological fixture in human society, only recently, with the advent of the interactive web, has it became a major research focus in social sciences (Arjona-Martín et al. 2020). A growing body of literature has highlighted the perverse effects of viralisation mechanisms, which allow extremism, disinformation and hate speech to leverage some of the inbuilt features of the internet's mass-sharing infrastructures: the lack of gatekeeping, the algorithmic amplification of highly engaging content regardless of its quality, the creation of echo chambers, etc. (Cooper 2012, Mathew et al. 2019, Paris and Donovan 2019, Ananthakrishnan and Tucker 2021, Finkelstein 2022). Antisemitism offers a good vantage point to observe such phenomena: polymorphic, adaptable and syncretic in nature, it is perfectly suited for an age of mass flow of information.

Since the late twentieth century, the internet has become the lifeblood of antisemitic propaganda distribution (Weitzman 2022). Far-right networks in anglophone countries were the first to organise online, using this channel to bypass institutional gatekeeping in mainstream media. At their heart, these online ecosystems were interactive, decentralised portals, such as the forums *Stormfront* and *The Right Stuff*, or Wikipedia-like archives such as *Jew Watch*. In this respect, the far-right anticipated the 'participatory turn' in digital communication. Since the 2000s, a 'revolution within the revolution' has taken place in communication, with Web 2.0 (or the interactive web) marking a transition from linear mass media (such as newspapers and the radio, or even the first websites) to user-driven creation and dissemination of

content. This unprecedented democratisation of speech has had a dark side: a dissemination of hate ideologies and antisemitism on a hitherto unknown scale (Hübscher and von Mering 2022). A central feature of content-sharing platforms such as *Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram* or *TikTok* is the use of automated sets of rules, called algorithms, that make decisions about what users see on the platform. Algorithms promote high-engagement content and, in doing so, risk amplifying outrageous content, including Holocaust-denial or conspiracy theories, because it generates reactions (likes, dislikes, comments and shares). These dynamics also fuel what Ebner (2020) dubs "radicalisation machines": algorithms tend to recommend content based on users' past viewing behaviour, thus creating 'echo chambers' and radicalisation pipelines, often without (or with minimal) external human involvement. This is why self-radicalisation is now a significant focal point of counter-extremism studies (see Archetti 2013, Bradbury et al. 2017). Machine-driven virality proves to be much harder to control and track than the human-driven virality of the past.

However, algorithms do not negate the fundamental verticality embedded into media discourse spaces. Wu et al. (2011) note that, while members of the general public now share the same access to social media that a celebrity does, information flows have not become egalitarian by any means. Personal salience (Bantimaroudis 2023) is still a key—and very unequally distributed—commodity in the attention economy (Marshall 2021, Hendricks and Mehlsen 2022). Although it is far from new or unique to social media, the figure of the *influencer* occupies a prominent position within information ecosystems and is a powerful driver of virality. Influencers—whether they are digitally native celebrities or have amassed their symbolic capital as artists, entertainers or journalists—act as "superspreaders" in networks who can set and proliferate socio-political agendas (Hendricks/Mehlsen 2022). The Covid pandemic foregrounded the agency of influencers in the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech (Baker 2022).

The interest of studying the role of online influencers in the spread of antisemitism is twofold. First and foremost, influencers act as bridges between digital networks and the broader social conversation. They are relevant as "ideological entrepreneurs" (Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2021)

of hate speech, who produce and circulate the stereotypes, analogies and discursive strategies that structure contemporary antisemitic discourse. Secondly, they possess resources of "affective capital" (Dong 2022), which can be channelled into building communities of supporters or fandoms (Stevenson 2018). The emotional and affective dimension that can be embedded into parasocial relations by charismatic celebrities is an interesting blind spot in the study of antisemitic discourse.

2.2 Between the 'old' and the 'new': Dieudonné and French antisemitism

The first such influencer we will be focusing upon is the French comedian and actor Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, who became famous for his comedy routines in the 1990s and early 2000s. Dieudonné was born in a Parisian suburb to a mixed-race middle-class family. He achieved a breakthrough in the world of entertainment with his long-time friend, the comedian Élie Semoun (who has Jewish origins), by performing anti-racist, left-leaning comedy routines. However, in the early 2000s, in a context marked by the post-9/11 rhetoric of the 'clash of civilisations' and an uptick in violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he split with Semoun and started promoting a form of 'Black consciousness' tinged with antisemitism and third-worldism (Jobard 2017). Despite being marginalised in the mainstream entertainment industry, Dieudonné managed to structure around him a dense network of alternative media. He re-established himself on his flagship website *Dieudosphère* (with on-demand video service and an e-shop), the streaming and news website *Quenel+*, as well as through his *Twitter* (150,000 followers), *Facebook* (1.3 million followers) and *YouTube* (400,000 followers) accounts. In 2020, *YouTube, Facebook* and *Instagram* decided in quick succession to ban his accounts, further cutting him off from the mainstream (Le Monde 2020). Today, he remains an active figure in far-right circles, trying to capitalise on various anti-establishment movements, such as the yellow vests and anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests.

Dieudonné is highly representative of the new ideological synthesis described as 'new antisemitism' (Taguieff 2004, Peace 2009, Bruneteau 2015, Weitzmann 2019). His appeal rests on a trinity of classical antisemitic tropes (such as GREED, CONSPIRACY or POWER), radical anti-Zionism

and a more diffuse anti-globalism that aligns with a rejection of the 'cosmopolitan elites' and Western liberal modernity. Dieudonné's core antisemitic views cluster around a few basic key themes:

The rejection of Israel

Anti-Zionism serves as the gateway towards a more radical form of antisemitism. Dieudonné engages in a demonisation of Israel, notably through the use of the NAZI ANALOGY (expressed through puns such as 'Israheil') or COLONIALISM ANALOGIES. His anti-Israeli discourse is not rooted in geopolitics or human rights but in what Taguieff (2004) dubs "fantasy-world Zionism": a belief that Israel and Zionists are plotting against the world; that they are omnipotent and demonic; that they are controlling and manipulating the global (and particularly Western) political, financial and media establishment.

The topos of JEWISH POWER

See Becker et al. 2024 on the topos of JEWISH POWER. Dieudonné's anti-Zionism maps onto the canonical narrative of a Jewish plot to take over the world. Dieudonné builds on the notion—developed by his long-time political ally Alain Soral—of the 'Empire', an alleged global oligarchic regime secretly run by the Jewish elite (Collectif des 4 2018). A French counterpart of the Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) conspiracy theory, this narrative is often hinted at by Dieudonné in his shows. For example, he uses his one liner "Au dessus c'est l'soleil" ["Above there's only the sun"], accompanied by a finger pointing upward, alongside references to Jews. This builds on CONSPIRACY narratives and tropes of alleged JEWISH POWER, suggesting that Jews sit at the very top of power hierarchies and receive orders from no one, unlike politicians or governments, which project an appearance of power but lack true agency. A corollary of this topos is

The topos of the TABOO OF CRITICISM

This posits that Jews will supposedly use their networks of influence to silence any critical opinion about them or the State of Israel. Dieudonné,

using his legal troubles and his exclusion from the mainstream entertainment industry, *performs* on stage his alleged victimisation and silencing at the hands of the Jews and their accomplices. He jokes that he cannot make jokes about Jews, designating them instead through allusions and detour communication (Proust et al. 2020). Dieudonné frames other comedians—especially if they are also from minority backgrounds—who decide to remain 'politically correct' as traitors, cowards and sell-outs: public figures who choose material comfort over truth.

Jews as ontological oppressors of non-White minorities

Borrowing from the discourse of the antisemitic *Nation of Islam* in the United States (with which the French comedian has strong links), he relentlessly describes Jews as slavers. This pattern of oppression is today perpetuated, according to him, in the Israeli treatment of Palestinians. This brings a distinct radicality to his anti-Zionist stances: if Palestinian suffering is not a result of an unfortunate geopolitical context but supposedly a natural consequence of Jewish nature, any peaceful cohabitation between the two peoples is impossible.

Denial and/or instrumentalisation of the Holocaust

See Becker et al. 2024 on this trope. Dieudonné's position on the Holocaust is a clear example of the ways contemporary Holocaust denial is formulated in contemporary discourse through the use of detour communication. Although he gives a platform in his shows to Holocaust deniers such as Robert Faurisson, Dieudonné has never explicitly denied the genocide of the Jewish people. Rather, he frequently adopts a pseudo-intellectual posture of radical scepticism; Dieudonné's 'doubt' aligns with a specific kind of Holocaust denial based on a hypertrophic form of rationality—one which claims to prolong the French tradition of Cartesianism (Jobard 2017). However, Dieudonné is more open in articulating the concept of the instrumentalisation of the holocaust by the Jews. He calls Holocaust commemoration "memorial pornography" and alleges that it has been weaponised by Jews to achieve their (Zionist) agenda. Classical antisemitic stereotypes like greed and avarice are

hybridised with themes specific to secondary antisemitism in sketches such as when he portrays the Jewish philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy trying to haggle with a greengrocer for a bag of potatoes: "With six million dead, you can at least give me a good price". He also mocks the Holocaust through puns and wordplay, such as with the song "Hot Pineapple" ("Chaud Ananas" in French, which is phonetically close to the word Shoah, a Hebrew word referring to the Holocaust).

Dieudonné's syncretic antisemitism merges anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, support of Palestinian movements, HOLOCAUST DENIAL and systematic suspicion of historical accounts. With millions of followers on social media, Dieudonné is the jutting prow and the public face of contemporary anti-Jewish prejudice in the French-speaking world.

2.3 The "Paranoid Style" of Kanye West: The Ambiguities of American Antisemitism

Unlike European nations, the United States has no significant history of institutionalised federal antisemitism. Under the 1790 Nationality Act, Jews were considered "free white persons" eligible for citizenship (Library of Congress n.d.). Nevertheless, anti-Jewish prejudice developed in the folds of racial science, social Darwinism (popular in the Anglo-Saxon world in the late nineteenth century) and/or Christian fundamentalism. In the interwar period, American populism borrowed heavily from fascism and national socialism: Reverend Charles Coughlin blamed Jews for the spread of communism, while at the same time railing against the 'international bankers' and 'money changers' of the world. He also asserted that Nazism was a "national mechanism of self-defence against Communism" (Dinnerstein 1995). Through its extensive use of modern mass media, notably radio broadcasts, Coughlin represents a sort of 'proto-influencer' who used technology and showmanship to amplify his message, building a parasocial bond with his audience. In post-war America, antisemitism was politically weak, but it could still be an effective force within broader anti-establishment coalitions. Latent anti-Jewish narratives were a structural element of what historian Richard Hofstadter (1967) called the "paranoid style" in American politics: a form of siege mentality and a fantasy of victimisation and moral decay that animates populist and

radical ideologies. Later, McCarthyism was infused with antisemitic innuendo, and this anti-communist crusade helped to revive the anti-Jewish sentiment of former Coughlinites. Antisemitism is also a subtext for Christian fundamentalism, despite followers' articulated support for Israel. The Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory, prevalent in most hardline conservative circles, retains elements of structural antisemitism in its allegation that the predominantly Jewish thinkers of the Frankfurt School have been systematically enacting a subversion of traditional American values and morality (Braune 2019).

But one of the most debated aspects of post-war antisemitism has been the rise of anti-Jewish prejudice in some Black communities. Dinnerstein (1995) suggests, quite pertinently, that the cultural legacy of evangelical Christianity had already created a predisposition towards antisemitism in Black communities in the deeply religious American South. However, the emergence of a coherent 'Black antisemitism' is rooted in disillusionment following the Civil Rights Movement, which led some activists to become radicalised. A 'martyrological competition' was established between slavery and the Holocaust, driven by belief that Jewish suffering is acknowledged while Black suffering is marginalised (Sundquist 2009). This resentment hardened into an even stronger allegation: that Jews are fundamentally oppressors that bear a major responsibility for the transatlantic trade. *Nation of Islam* leader Louis Farrakhan alleged that Jews have an "undeniable record" of "anti-Black behavior starting with the horror of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, Jim Crow, sharecropping, the labour movement of the North and South, the unions and the misuse of our people that continues to this very moment" (Farrakhan 2010). The Black Power movement embraced Islam, third-worldism and, with these, anti-Zionist attitudes. Black antisemitism in America has been just as syncretic as the 'new antisemitism' in France, rehashing old tropes such as the supposed global Jewish plot, greed or usury. It also produced original outputs, such as the bizarre Black Hebrew Israelites myth, according to which Black people are the rightful descendants of Biblical Hebrews, and contemporary Jews have usurped this genealogy (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.).

Kanye West's political trajectory is, contrary to Dieudonné's, far from linear and coherent. One of the most recognizable faces in the

global entertainment and music industry, the Chicago-born rapper, singer, songwriter, record producer and fashion designer started off as a quintessential Black icon. Since then, his political stances radicalised and increasingly attracted controversy. His embrace of religion and of social conservatism (on themes such as abortion) was mirrored by a more sinister promotion of far-right ideology, whether through selling Confederate flags on tour, donning a "White Lives Matter" T-shirt or issuing a spate of antisemitic comments on social media (ADL 2022). While still inchoate, West's antisemitism matters. First and foremost, as an international celebrity spanning multiple industries, West potentially reaches an unprecedented global audience. Secondly, like Dieudonné, his specific strand of 'intersectional' antisemitism sits at the juncture of multiple ideological traditions. West has cultivated strong links to the *Nation of Islam* and Farrakhan, who he called "sensei" (ADL 2022). More recently, West has also been active in right-wing networks: he has been a guest on the conservative *Fox News* talk show "Tucker Carlson Tonight", dined with white supremacist Nick Fuentes and former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence and appeared on conspiracy theorist Alex Jones's *InfoWars* show (ADL 2022). West's antisemitic statements cluster around a few prominent themes:

Tropes about Jewish POWER AND CONTROL—particularly in the entertainment and media industry—as well as tropes about Jewish GREED and EXPLOITATION

West has espoused conspiracy narratives such as the '300 families'[1] or ZOG, which claim that a (Jewish) oligarchy controls the economic system, the world's governments and media corporations: "The Zionist control—the 300 in control of the media and in control of the governments—they don't want us to connect to each other..." ("The Alex Jones Show" on *InfoWars*, 1 December 2022); "[...] the Jewish people have their hand on every single business that controls the world" ("Drink Champs", 16 October 2022). Such statements map onto the notion of a Jewish takeover of Hollywood and the entertainment

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1   The '300 families' is a conspiracy theory that claims a powerful group of interconnected oligarchs, often presented as Jewish, are controlling politics, finance, banking and the military.

industry, which has been embedded into American antisemitism since the 1920s—a time when Jews, amongst others, were accused of using film to weaken the moral fibre of the country with increasing violent and sexual content (Carr 2001). The Cultural Marxism narrative, as well as more recent QAnon phenomenon[2], sees Hollywood and the creative industries as focal points for the dissolution of the American traditional order. Kanye's allegations articulate two distinct narratives from different sides of the political spectrum: that parasitic Jewish elites have captured the heart of the country and that they use their cultural capital to exploit marginalised groups (Black artists) for profit. He has said, "Jewish people have owned the Black voice... The Jewish community, especially in the music industry, in the entertainment [industry], they'll take one of us, the brightest of us [...] and milk us till we die". ("Drink Champs", 16 October 2022). Re-activating the language of 'ownership' of Black people by Jews also connects back to the narrative, popular within certain Black Power milieus, of Jews supposedly organising the transatlantic slave trade.

Questioning Jewish identity through the Black Hebrew Israelite ideology

The Black Hebrew Israelite (BHI) narrative, which West has espoused alongside another high-profile celebrity, basketball star Kyrie Irving, not only erases Jewish identity but also maps onto the stereotype of Jewish deceitfulness and even greed, as it alleges Jews are unfairly benefitting from a usurped status. It can also serve, in West's rhetoric, as a line of defence against antisemitic allegations: "We are Semite, we Jew, so I can't be antisemite" ("Drink Champs", 16 October 2022).

Holocaust denial and affirmation of Hitler and Nazism

West has stated that "The Holocaust is not what happened. Let's look at the facts of that. And Hitler has a lot of redeeming qualities". ("The Alex Jones Show" on *InfoWars*, 1 December 2022). He also suggests that the negative portrayal of Nazis is a result of the purported Jewish monopoly on media: "The Jewish media has made us feel like the Nazis and Hitler

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2   The QAnon conspiracy theory posits that the world is controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles.

have never offered anything of value to the world". ("The Alex Jones Show" on *InfoWars*, 1 December 2022).

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West has asserted: "I crossed the antisemite line. I crossed the gun line. I stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square". ("Drink Champs", 16 October 2022). He also often makes a parallel between the social opprobrium over antisemitic beliefs and the genocide of the Jewish people, thus engaging in a trivialisation of the Holocaust: "There's Jewish people that are basically hiding me under their floorboards right now—under the wooden floors. It's like a reverse version of the Holocaust" ("The Alex Jones Show" on *InfoWars*, 1 December 2022).

3. Empirical analysis: Comparative case study of web user reactions in French media

In the first stage of the empirical analysis, we attempt to gauge the level of support for Dieudonné and Kanye West expressed in the comment sections. I am operating with three broad categories: antisemitic speech, non-antisemitic speech and counter speech. Non-antisemitic speech includes any comment which does not contain an antisemitic concept, while counter speech is defined more specifically as communicative action that seeks to actively problematise and refute antisemitic tropes, or, more generally, Dieudonné's and Kanye West's behaviour.

In the Dieudonné subcorpus of 1,464 user comments, 58% (n=850) has been labelled non-antisemitic or unclear; 19% (n=284) has been labelled as counter speech. The remaining 23% (n=331) were labelled as antisemitic following the IHRA definition. Only a minority (13%, or 45) of those 331 antisemitic comments were explicit. The vast majority (86%, or 286) relied on implication, detour communication or prior cultural knowledge for the decoding of the antisemitic meaning. In the Kanye West subcorpus, composed of 1,953 comments, 82% (n=1,607) were classified as non-antisemitic or unclear, only 4% (n=69) were deemed to constitute counter speech and 14% (n=276) were of an antisemitic nature. Once again, most of the comments in this final subset (79%, or

220) make use of contextual forms of antisemitic speech, with only 56 comments being explicit.

Of the 3,417 comments analysed in total, therefore, 607, or 17% were antisemitic. These are split unevenly across the two subcorpora (23% and 14% respectively). I hypothesise that the disparity in the percentage of antisemitic comments between the two subcorpora can be explained by the fact that Dieudonné has a highly politicised nucleus of supporters, who fully engage not only with his comedic content but also with his ideological worldview. Meanwhile, West's supporters are often depoliticised and express admiration for the rapper's artistic achievement while distancing themselves from his controversial political stances. A common distancing strategy is the separation of the art from the artist or questioning his mental capacity. Following the codebook developed in the project Decoding Antisemitism, praise for Dieudonné or West's artistic achievements, without reference to their political stances, was classified as non-antisemitic.

A similar dynamic might be an important factor for the dramatic disparity in counter speech observed (19% in the Dieudonné subcorpus to slightly under 4% in the West subcorpus). The polarising and highly politicised nature of Dieudonné means that most of the backlash in the comment sections explicitly targets and problematises his antisemitism. Web users often address and contest allegations of censorship, highlighting for example the private nature of Big Tech companies (which have their own standards outlined in the terms of use) or the illegal nature, under French law, of antisemitic speech. This is not the case in the West subcorpus, where most of the criticism levelled against the rapper is vaguer and encompasses, beyond his political opinions, other aspects of his eccentric persona.

Despite these differences, the most prominent antisemitic topoï were strikingly similar. Unsurprisingly, the concepts and strategies articulated by web users mirror Dieudonné's and West's own discourse against Jews. On the most basic conceptual level, comments convey antisemitism by expressing support for the two influencers and reinforcing their social and political worldview. Support is articulated through conventional phrases such as "Full support to Kanye 💪💪"[3] (LCI.F-FB[20221026]),

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3   "Soutien à Kanye 💪💪".

"Sending support and strength, Dieudo"[4] (LEFIG-FB[20200630]), "GO DIEUDO" (LEFIG-FB[20200630]) and also through iconographic elements, such as hearts, clapping hands or flexed-arm emojis. The choice of attributes—"brave", "courageous", "free-thinking"—has an embedded political dimension, reinforcing the narrative that Dieudonné and West are dissenters or martyrs persecuted by society for their beliefs: "They [Dieudonné and his ally Alain Soral] are the two most courageous men in France"[5] (MARIA-FB[20200806]); "YE's bluntness and free spirit is bothering the conspirators"[6] (BFMTV-FB[20221027]). Sexual metaphors such as "bending over", implying submission and servility, are also used in predication strategies, distinguishing them from 'sell-out' mainstream entertainers who do not question the system: "At least Kanye kept his pants on unlike those wet rags"[7] (BFMTV-FB[20221027]).

Support for these influencers is also articulated in implicit ways, through allusions and detour communication. The slogan "Je suis Kanye" or "Je suis Dieudonné" ["I am Kanye" or "I am Dieudonné"] has, in this context, a threefold function: first, to express solidarity with the allegedly silenced celebrity; second, to politicise this support by portraying them as victims of a brutal censorship attempt, which is compared to terrorism; third, it levels an accusation of double standards and hypocrisy against liberal democracies, which are accused of promoting the values of free speech yet cracking down on anti-Jewish offensive speech. One example is, "Je suis Charlie, that does not work for these people as they pick on the poor Jews... what a double standard... disgusting"[8] (LEPAR-FB[20200707]).

This maps onto another highly salient topos: the topos of the TABOO OF CRITICISM. In synergy with the topos of JEWISH POWER, it enacts an effective argumentation macro-strategy, because it appeals to the consensual liberal ethos of freedom of expression and conscience: "The best comedian in France is persecuted for daring to make jokes about a group that shall not be named. Freedom of speech is just hypocrisy

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4   "Soutien et courage Dieudo".
5   "C'est les 2 hommes les plus courageux de France.''
6   "Cette liberté d'expression et d'esprit de YE dérange la théorie du complot".
7   "Au moins Kanye a su garder son pantalon contrairement à tt ces serpillières".
8   "Je suis Charlie , ca ne marche pas pour ces gens car ici sa rabaisse les pvres juifs ....deux poids deux mesurs ...deguelasse Tout sa".

and double standards"[9] (LEFIG-FB[20200709]). The Jewish out-group is rarely mentioned directly but is regularly alluded to through phrases such as the "chosen people", "the untouchables" or "the community that shall not be named". Intensification strategies and hyperboles are also used, through claims that "there are first-class citizens, and those who are not permitted to look at them or talk about them"[10] (LEFIG-FB[20221025]). Feeding into broader anti-elitist and populist frames, this comment manufactures a dichotomy between an alleged corrupt (Jewish) elite and the pure people, kept by the taboo of criticism into a state of submission. Other comments use literary allusions to George Orwell's novel *1984* to create, based on an alleged suppression of free speech, a metaphorical parallel between Orwell's brutal dystopia and Western societies: "The Ministry of Truth strikes again. They are not even hiding it anymore"[11] (LEFIG-FB[20200709]). The taboo of criticism triggers what Ruth Wodak (2015) dubbed an ideological *"perpetuum mobile"*, a rhetorical strategy which involves legitimising a controversial statement by means of shifting the optics and reframing the debate. In this case, the antisemitic nature of Dieudonné's and West's stances are being obfuscated by a debate about civil freedoms. Another such argumentation strategy built on re-framing attempts to shift the attention towards the treatment of other discriminated minorities alleges that there is a pervasive societal double standard which shields Jews from any criticism while tolerating attacks on other ethnic and religious groups. While not systematically antisemitic, these remarks frequently intersect other antisemitic stereotypes, such as Jewish power and privilege or accusations of instrumentalising the Holocaust.

The most prominent concepts found in the corpus analysed are listed in Table 3.2 below:

9　　"Le meilleur humoriste de France qui est persécuté parce qu'il a osé faire des sketchs sur une communauté qu'on a pas le droit de citer. Comme quoi la liberté d'expression c'est de l'hypocrisie de deux poids deux mesures"

10　　"Il y a les citoyens de première zone et ceux qui ne peuvent les regarder ou parler d'eux".

11　　"Le Ministere de la vérité a frappé. Ils ne se cachent même plus".

Topos	Percentage (of all antisemitic comments)		Definition	Examples
	Dieudonné Subcorpus	Kanye West Subcorpus		
Affirmation of antisemitism	26%	26%	Support, praise, legitimation or justification of an antisemitic person, act or concept	"Full support to Kanye 💪 💪" (LCI.F-FB[20221026]) "Sending support and strength, Dieudo" (LEFIG-FB[20200630]) "JE SUIS DIEUDONNE" (MARIA-FB[20200806])
TABOO OF CRITICISM	34%	31%	The idea that all opinions critical of Jewish people are being systematically supressed and persecuted	"Strangely, only those who criticise the J*** are done away with, treated worse than murderers or child rapists!!!"[12] (LEPOI-FB[20221212]) "To learn who rules you, find out who you are not allowed to criticise"[13] (LEFIG-FB[20221208]) "Dieudonné is censored, which is shameful, in a country which pretends to be the land of freedom!"[14] (LEFIG-FB[20200711]) "The Ministry of Truth strikes again. They are not even hiding it any more" (LEFIG-FB[20200709])

12   "Bizarrement il n'y a que ceux qui critiquent les j**** qui finissent au placard, présenté comme des assassins pire que les vrais violeurs de gosses !!!"
13   "Pour savoir qui vous gouverne, regardez qui vous ne pouvez pas critiquer"
14   "Dieudonné est censuré, ce qui est une honte dans un pays qui se revendique être celui de la liberté!"

Topos	Percentage (of all antisemitic comments)		Definition	Examples
	Dieudonné Subcorpus	Kanye West Subcorpus		
CONSPIRACY	9%	17%	The allegation that Jews exercise a secret control over society	"The dude spoke against the world order, he's getting shot down by the rulers of the rulers"[15] (BFMTV-FB[20221027]) "And then they say that it's not true, ((((they)))) don't control everything"[16] (BFMTV-FB[20221027]) "This comes from very very high-up, from Tel-Aviv"[17] (LEFIG-FB[20200630])
CONTROL OVER MEDIA	6%	3%	The allegation that Jews exercise control over media institutions and public opinion	"He's in the crosshairs of the community that represent the 500.000 who control the media in France"[18] (LEFIG-FB[20200711])

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15   "Le mec a parlé contre l'ordre mondial, il se fait abattre par les dirigeants des dirigeants".

16   "Et après on nous dit que ce n'est pas vrai, (((ils))) ne contrôlent pas tout".

17   "Ça vient d'en haut de très haut, du côté de Tel-Aviv"

18   "Il est dans le viseur de la communauté qui représente 500.000 personnes en France qui contrôlent les médias françaises".

Topos	Percentage (of all antisemitic comments)		Definition	Examples
	Dieudonné Subcorpus	Kanye West Subcorpus		
SELF-VICTIMISATION	4%	7%	Construction of victimhood of the non-Jewish in-group at the hands of the Jewish out-group	"If you are not like them, they'll squish you like a bug"[19] (BFMTV-FB[20221208]) "He's been CRIFicied (pardon this neologism)[20]" (LEPAR-FB[20200707])

Table 3.2: The most prominent concepts found in the corpus

4. Detour communication, pop culture and community-building

Another crucial insight of the empirical study concerns the more subtle encoding mechanisms that occur within comment sections. Following Stuart Hall's (2010) influential model of communication, we conceptualise discourse as fundamentally dialogical and interactive: the intersubjectivity of the encoding/decoding process means that communication establishes a recognitive relationship between the sender and the receiver of a message. This dynamic applies also to hate speech and, particularly, to antisemitism. Various authors (Bergmann and Erb 1984, Milbradt 2013, Schwarz-Friesel 2019, Richards et al. 2023) highlight that antisemitic speech increasingly relies on "detour communication" and dog whistles to circumvent the social taboo associated with crude anti-Jewish prejudice. Dog whistles, which can be defined as coded or suggestive language understood by the in-group but hard to decode for the out-group (Richards et al. 2023), are a

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19   "C est comsa ,ils sont ,si tu n est pas les leurs il sont pres a t ecrasé comme un caffart".

20   "Il a été CRIFicié (permettez-moi le néologisme)". CRIF is the acronym of the *Conseil Représentatativ des Institutions Juives de France*, one of the main bodies representing the Jewish minority in France.

particularly interesting form of implicit communication. All implicit communication requires contextual or cultural knowledge to some extent. For example, the allegation in one comment that the order to terminate Dieudonné's social media accounts came from "very very high up, from Tel-Aviv" (LEFIG-FB[20200630]) demands cultural information about the Jewish state and its most populous city, but this information is superficial and very easily accessible. A dog whistle mobilises deeper strata of subcultural knowledge, the meaning of which is opaque to the uninitiated. For example, the triple parentheses (seen in a comment in Table 3.2) or references to "celestial dragons" (see below) will not make sense to someone who is not familiar with the vernacular of online antisemitism. Dog whistles are in a constant state of fluctuation, as new meanings emerge and replace the old.

The corpus exhibits, amongst antisemitic comments, a high level of reliance of coded languages and dog whistles. Some of them, like the echoes (triple parentheses), are well-established in the international language of antisemitism. The echoes, believed to originate from the neo-Nazi American blog *The Right Stuff*, are used to encase a name, institution or category—for instance (((Soros))) or (((bankers)))—to identify it as Jewish; originally, it was a visual pun signifying that Jewish names and actions "echo throughout History" (Smith and Fleishman 2016). They appear a few times in our corpus, often in the context of accusations of an alleged Jewish conspiracy: "And then they tell us that ((((they)))) don't control everything" (BFMTV-FB[20221027]). While the echoes represent a form of the globalisation of antisemitic vernacular, other dog whistles are specific to the French context and suggest that processes of encoding and decoding are still mainly taking place within each language community, even if there is, naturally, an increased level of cross-pollination between them.

Dieudonné's success in antisemitic milieux was due to his ability to create viral slogans, puns and catchphrases that are perfectly suited to the internet ecosystem. Unsurprisingly, web users repeat these slogans in their comments as a way of covertly conveying approval of Dieudonné's worldview or to manufacture new communication patterns. The one-liner "Above there's only the sun" (see section 2.2), often accompanied or visually represented by the sun emoji, enacts a metaphor for Jewish power: "Then they tell you they are not above the sun. So unfair. They

do as they please in this country[21]" (LEFIG-FB[20200630]); "When you touch the sun ☀ you get burnt"[22] (BFMTV-FB[20221208]). The fact such comments show up consistently in our West subcorpus demonstrate they go beyond in-jokes within Dieudonné's fandom and belong to the vernacular of antisemitism in France. Other elements borrowed from Dieudonné's shows include the pineapple symbol—from the "Hot Pineapple" ["Chaud ananas"] jingle—or the phrase "How much does it cost?". The former does not have a fixed meaning, but it is often used to mock accusations of antisemitism or Jewish identity in general, therefore functioning as a knowing wink to other web users familiar with this symbolism. The latter has more conceptual depth, as it maps onto traditional tropes of Jewish greed but also recent accusations of instrumentalising antisemitism: in Dieudonné's sketches, public figures seeking forgiveness for having offended the Jewish community enquire about the amount of financial compensation they need to offer to be 're-admitted' into public life. Commenters now allude that it is Dieudonné and West who will need to pay up to ensure they will be allowed back in the entertainment industry. The meaning is sometimes reinforced by other allusions. For example, one commenter states that Dieudonné will have to pay his compensation in shekels, Israel's currency, thus implying the beneficiaries of this alleged financial "extorsion" scheme (VALEU-FB[20200701]).

Dog whistles are in constant flux, and new meanings and codes emerge as old ones fade out of relevancy. In the French space, the West subcorpus reveals a new pattern. Drawing on anime culture, Jews are often referred to as "celestial dragons" ["dragons célestes"]. In the manga *One Piece* by Eiichiro Oda, "celestial dragons" refer to the greedy, arrogant and cruel aristocracy in that fictional universe. Embedding antisemitic stereotypes into pop-culture vernacular ensures that old antisemitic repertoires (such as concepts of GREED, EVIL or GLOBAL POWER) are more easily transferred to contemporary times, able to find new audiences, especially amongst young people who are not otherwise familiar with the ideological tenets of antisemitism. It can also increase

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21   "Après on nous dira qu'ils sont pas au-dessus du soleil. Belle injustice, ils font ce qu'ils veulent dans ce pays".
22   "Quand tu touches le soleil ☀ tu te brules".

the virality of the message, by reducing complex concepts to shareable hashtags and by circumventing moderation filters.

But coded antisemitism is not only a strategic move to evade content moderation efforts. It cuts to the core of the in-group/out-group dynamic upon which antisemitism (amongst other hate ideologies) is premised. Coded language functions as a tool for community-building, creating what psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan (1966: 80 ff) dubbed a social process of "reciprocal recognition" between the actors in the communication act. Being able to understand and decode the inside jokes (and, more broadly, the crypted references) reinforces the sense of belonging. In the case of antisemitism, the social opprobrium adds a new dimension to such processes of community-building. The pleasure of taking part in transgressive "prohibitions" is a strong component that fuels identification with the in-group, while increasing the (moral) gap with the out-group (Proust et al. 2020). As both Dieudonné and West have created a public persona around their alleged victimisation at the hands of the Jewish out-group, expressions of support for the two influencers draw on the same repertoire of performative transgression. Due to their high level of media salience and their extensive sympathy capital, the two influencers have become focal points for the creation of such deviant online communities, however diffuse they may be.

5. Conclusions

This paper sets out to understand the way web users try, in mainstream discourse spaces, to negotiate support for highly controversial public figures accused of antisemitism. Despite the strong moral stigma attached to antisemitism in Western societies, we found both Dieudonné and Kanye West received strong support from, respectively, 23% and 17% of web users in comment sections of major French media outlets. A qualitative empirical analysis of these comments showcases a clear ideological parallel between the antisemitic repertoire of the two influencers and the one mobilised by their supporters. This fact highlights the centrality of influencer speech on the spread of antisemitic tropes. Both Dieudonné and West are products of their social, political and ideological context, and, as such, they are recipients of entrenched traditions of antisemitic thinking in France and the United States. But

they also possess a considerable agency: they are not merely 'amplifiers' of antisemitism but also 'ideological entrepreneurs' who actively create and refine new concepts, putting them into circulation in the ideological marketplace. These concepts, fuelled and boosted by the influencer's own personal media salience, achieve viral status before 'trickling down' and entering everyday discourse.

Another key of the success of such 'pop' antisemitism is its heavy use of coded language. Harbouring yet hiding antisemitic meaning, this coded language serves as a medium for passing elements of antisemitic ideology under conditions of social opprobrium. But it can also enhance a sense of belonging and of community within the in-group, by adding a ludic dimension to social and discursive transgression. This raises a set of questions—notably on the dynamics of virality of such antisemitic content on social media and the role of influencers or other 'nodes' in its spread—that would need to be addressed in further empirically grounded research on antisemitism, hate speech and digital culture.

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